Karna in the Mahabharata: Loyalty, Friendship, and Empathy

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Karna's Strategy and the Confrontation with Arjuna

As the war began, Bhishma organized the Kaurava army, and Karna was appointed as one of the 100 commanders. He pledged to Dhritarashtra that he would enter the battle once Bhishma fell, and then he left. Duryodhana questioned Karna's decision that night, but bystanders intervened. Karna brought Duryodhana to the battlefield, explaining that allowing Bhishma to lead while conserving his strength until needed was a sound strategy. Duryodhana agreed.

After ten days of battle, Bhishma, struck down by arrows, chose to leave the battlefield, fulfilling his vow to depart when he wished. Karna then entered the fray. Throughout the conflict, unfair tactics were employed. On the 13th day, Abhimanyu was defeated. By the 14th day, tensions escalated, culminating in a fierce battle. Finally, on the 17th day, Arjuna and Karna confronted each other directly.

Karna's Request for Salya as Charioteer

Before the 17th day of the war, Karna approached Duryodhana and requested Salya, uncle of the Pandavas, to be his charioteer, similar to Krishna being Arjuna's charioteer. Despite Salya's lineage, known for bravery and strength, Duryodhana agreed. When he asked Salya to take the reins of Karna chariot, Salya initially drew his sword. Duryodhana

calmly reasoned that being a charioteer was not dishonorable, pointing out that even Krishna was Arjuna's charioteer. Moved by Duryodhana's words, Salya relented and accepted the role.

Once on the battlefield, Karna asserted his independence, stating he would fight as he saw fit. Both Karna and Salya pledged to fight for Duryodhana's victory, setting the stage for their involvement in the upcoming battle.

The Confrontation: Karna and Arjuna Face Off

As Arjuna and Karna faced each other on the battlefield, the ground shook with anticipation. Karna wielded the fearsome Nagasthra, instilling terror among the soldiers. Salya, Karna's charioteer, advised him to aim for Arjuna's chest to ensure his defeat. However, Karna, known for his pride and independence, insisted on targeting Arjuna's neck instead, questioning Salya's right to dictate tactics.

Despite Salya's persistence, Karna stood firm in his decision. He released the Nagasthra, and as it approached Arjuna, Krishna intervened cleverly. Krishna subtly maneuvered the chariot downwards by one foot, causing the arrow intended for Arjuna's neck to strike his crown instead. This ingenious move saved Arjuna's life, as the arrow's impact was still accurate but harmless.

The Final Moments of Karna: Krishna's Intervention

As Karna faced Arjuna once more with the Nagasthra, Salya urged him to aim again, but Karna remembered Kunti's wish and fell silent. Left with only one hand to use, he skillfully managed his chariot with the other. This moment reflected a previous boon granted by Parasurama, where Karna had mastered such feats.

However, Karna's chariot became stuck in a pit, halting the battle. He descended from his chariot and tried to free it, even attempting to lift it by hand, which moved Krishna to laughter. Realizing the significance, Krishna instructed Arjuna to launch arrows, causing Karna to faint from their impact. In this state, Krishna declared his task complete and approached Karna to take his life.

As the sun set, Krishna appeared in the guise of a beggar from the Himalayas. Karna, barely conscious, asked who he was. The beggar requested alms, and Karna, true to his lifelong policy of granting any request, agreed, stating he didn't know where his spirit lay. Krishna then asked for the merit of all the good deeds Karna had performed, a request that filled Karna with happiness. He realized Krishna was testing him, and with a laugh, he offered all the merit of his deeds.

The Final Act of Karna: Devotion and Sacrifice

In his final moments on the battlefield, Karna displayed profound devotion and sacrifice. Knowing his end was near, he symbolically transferred all his accumulated merit and good deeds to Krishna. Using an arrow dipped in his own blood, Karna offered his merit

to Krishna, demonstrating his unparalleled generosity and dedication.

Krishna, moved by Karna's selflessness, asked for a boon in return. Karna, despite facing death, requested Krishna to grant him heart as generosity the needy even after the next many life. Krishna, recognizing Karna's noble spirit, fulfilled his wish.

Witnessing Krishna's divine form, Karna was overcome with emotion. He tearfully acknowledged seeing the divine presence before peacefully departing from the mortal realm.

Aftermath of Karna's Death: Revelation and Grief

Following Karna's death in the battlefield, both sides, the Kauravas led by Duryodhana and the Pandavas, mourned deeply. Kunti, Karna's mother, arrived and stood amidst both groups, her heart heavy with grief upon realizing Karna was her son. The Kauravas lamented the loss of their loyal ally, while the Pandavas grieved for their brother whom they had fought against unknowingly.

Bhima, in his sorrow, questioned Krishna why he had not revealed Karna's true identity earlier. Krishna replied with a poignant statement, suggesting that while others had lived in ignorance of the truth, Karna alone had lived with the knowledge of his lineage and his fate.

Reflection on Karna's Death:

1. ***Loss of Kavacham:*** Indra took Karna's protective armor (kavacham) through deceit, leaving him vulnerable in battle.

2. ***Curse of Parashurama:*** Karna's teacher, Parashurama, cursed him and withdrew the knowledge he had imparted, further diminishing his strength.

3. ***Abandonment by Family:***
   Father's Absence: Karna's father, Surya, left him at birth, unable to protect him.
   Mother's Abandonment: Kunti, Karna's mother, abandoned him as an infant, unaware of their familial connection.

4. ***Loss of Spiritual Supports:*** Krishna received all of Karna's accumulated good deeds, symbolizing the departure of his spiritual protectors (Madha, Pitha, Guru, Deivam).

Krishna mourned Karna's death, acknowledging his immense generosity and character, inviting others to witness the passing of such a noble soul. Karna's life and death underscored his unwavering nobility and selflessness, even in the face of profound challenges and betrayals.